Fighting the IDT Tank Table VIII: A National Guard Unit's Solution

by Major Mike Pryor

The October 1998 version of Tank Table VIII's (TT VIII) tasks, conditions, and standards are vastly different from the version we all executed prior to that date. But after two annual qualification attempts, we believe our battalion has cracked the code on how to conduct a successful Inactive Duty Training (IDT — often called simply "drill") gunnery.

In order for the reader to gain the proper perspective on this issue, understand that National Guard tankers do not conduct tank gunnery qualification like their active duty brethren. Our active duty contemporaries are usually provided a couple of consecutive weeks to complete a Level One tank battalion gunnery cycle. While we adhere to the same tasks, conditions, and standards, our program requires breaking the tasks into blocks lasting about two days, sandwiched around two-to-four week periods of 'leave.' It is the lack of continuous training time, in a highly technical skill with no equivalent in the civilian job market, that makes gunnery proficiency no simple task.

There are several key pieces of information the reader needs in order to understand our gunnery program. To properly organize this information, this article is divided into four main sections: Planning, Preparation, Execution, and Summary.

Planning

All training events should begin with a good assessment. Below is the Army standard METT-T assessment approach that we used.

Mission. Our training missions for TY00 included: 100 percent TT VIII qualification for assigned crews in IDT status, company (team) level maneuver proficiency in Annual Training (AT) status, staff proficiency in the Abbreviated Decision Making Process (ADMP), and the ability to support the force at the echelon of organization. These missions are all in line to meet prerequisites for our impending TY01 NTC rotation. In order to meet preparatory gunnery training requirements, we elected to conduct one IDT of TCGST training at company level, one IDT for our record TCGST, one IDT for TCPC certification, and completion of COFT gates throughout the training year. All of these tasks had to be complete before crews could conduct TT VIII qualification.

Because we desired to stress the TC's role in training his crew, our record TCGST was evaluated at the crew level, with our own TCs as evaluators. Assisting each TC was a 3-395th Armor Training Support Battalion (TSBn) mentor who certified the TC to test his crew on each task. The NCOs from 3-395th Armor also served as our TCEs for TCPC and tank gunnery qualification. Dropped from the TY99 training program was a modified, live-fire TT V. After completing our first gunnery cycle, we found a well-zeroed coaxial machine gun, firing multiple weapons systems engagements during the modified TT VII — and an understanding that you engaged until you knocked down at least one troop target — were all our crews needed in order to be successful in machine gun engagements.

We also took a different look at COFT requirements. In TY99, all crews fired exercises 101, 102, 104, 153, 135, 137 and 139 using the new 314 COFT disk. Minimum passing criteria for each exercise was set as Target Acquisition: A; Reticle Aim: B; and Systems Management: B. The increased requirement to receive a grade of "A" in Target Acquisition improved a crew's speed to acquire and shoot in the offense and move into hull defilade in the defense. For TY00, stabilized TC/gunner combinations from the previous gunnery cycle conducted a re-certification session. During this session, each crew fired Exercise 101 once as warm-up and then would fire Exercise 139 once. Crew COFT proficiency and TY00 COFT training requirements are depicted in Figure 1 below based on the results of Exercise 139.

This allowed us to concentrate IDT time on newer and less proficient crews, as well as keep crews who were not within a 50-mile radius from having to come to the armory on multiple evenings or days. (We only have one MCOFT and one UCOFT to conduct training for the battalion and the brigade's cavalry troop.) Any crew that wished to fire more than the minimum COFT requirement was allowed to do so as long as their firing did not interfere with the training of less proficient crews.

Once IDT gunnery was complete and we met or exceeded the 85 percent qualification rate called for by STRAC, we would then concentrate on maneuver training. Staff proficiency training continued throughout the year as we prepared for a brigade-level CPX and our annual rotation to the LTP program at Fort Irwin, California. Our gunnery train-up schedule looked like Figure 2.

Enemy. As we saw it, we had one primary "enemy" — the range itself.

Results of the Certification Exercise 139	COFT Training Requirement
Score of 800-1000 (Superior or Distinguished)	**Certified** – The crew has no COFT requirement to shoot intermediate gunnery, but should be strongly encouraged to conduct COFT training during periods other than IDT.
Score of 700-799 (Qualified)	**Complete Exercises 135, 137, and 139** to be certified prior to shooting intermediate gunnery.
Score of 699 or Less (Unqualified)	**Complete Exercise 101, 102, 104, 153, 135, 137 and 139** to be certified prior to shooting intermediate gunnery.

Figure 1 – TY00 COFT Training Requirements

SEP 99	OCT 99	NOV 99	DEC 99	JAN 00	FEB 00
TCGST Train-Up	Record TCGST	No Drill	Org/Family Day	TCPC Qualification	TTVII(M) & TTVIII

Figure 2 – TY00 Monthly Gunnery Training Plan

Our range assessment actually began at the end of AT98 when we received word that TT VIII's tasks, conditions, and standards were changing. Back then, the battalion S3 and master gunners decided we needed to confirm or deny the range's viability for accomplishing this task. Our initial, gut assessment was that the Multi-Purpose Range Complex (MPRC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, would *not* support the new TT VIII's targetry requirements. After all, our battalion was the only unit on the post stressing practically the entire range's array of targets in gunnery. But our initial instincts were wrong.

Once our battalion cleared the MPRC and headed to Peason Ridge for maneuver training, several of our battalion and TSBn master gunners stayed behind to put the course to the test. The MPRC range crew of Fort Polk Range Control, led by Mr. Steve Parks, eagerly aided in this endeavor, assisting us with scenario development, its loading into the MPRC's computer system, and the setting up of range targetry. Once ready, the master gunners ran the course on both Lanes A and C, using Thru-Sight Video (TSV). The TSV battle runs verified that targetry could be observed from tanks in the firing boxes on both lanes. The master gunners also took GPS readings of all targetry to determine whether or not engagement distances met *FM 17-12-1* standards. The GPS readings indicated we only had three targets that were initially outside of *FM 17-12-1* requirements.

With limited moving target presentations, our challenge was presenting troop targets with moving targets at the proper ranges. Again, Mr. Parks and the MPRC maintenance team came through by doing what was previously thought impossible. They hard-wired four new troop targets, reducing the target range discrepancies to within 200 meters of *FM 17-12-1* requirements. Changing the targets' movement speed, faster or slower, with stops and/or reverse movement at 10-15 second intervals of the presentation time, met our "evasive mover" requirement. Additionally, this MPRC did not have any "flat-line" moving target presentations. All movers roll up and down hills. With this very important assessment complete, we submitted the findings to the master gunner branch at Fort Knox. After their review, we received a TT VIII certification nod for the Fort Polk MPRC. We found that we did not have as many alternate targets as we would like (especially our movers), and we determined the MPRC computers needed more processing power, but we nonetheless had our range.

Time Available. There were two primary considerations in our assessment of time available. One question centered on whether there was enough time to conduct make-up training for any crew that missed an IDT for any reason. We saw the only time available to conduct make-up training was during a subsequent IDT period. To set the proper tone, commander's intent called for all TC/gunner combinations to arrive at the range with all preliminary gunnery training completed.

The other question was, what period of time offered the best opportunity to meet the training goal? A normal Multiple Unit Training Assembly of five periods (or MUTA-5) requires soldiers to report to the unit armory on Friday night and ends on Sunday afternoon at 1700 hours with the release of soldiers, again from their armory. After travel time (it is 120 miles to Fort Polk from most units) and maintenance time, this equates to only about 22 hours of live-fire time on the range at Fort Polk. We tried this in TY99 and successfully qualified 22 crews over seven MUTA-5s. On any given MUTA-5, however, one or both lanes had at least one crew that fired but did not qualify, due to a need for more training and/or retraining time that was just not available. There would be no way to shift them to AT qualification as we had done in TY99.

After some discussion, we concluded that a MUTA-9 best suited our needs. We knew other Guard units had conducted extended-MUTA sessions in order to complete major training events. Indeed, the Guard Bureau's leadership had spoken for months of the need to creatively use a Guardsman's "39-days-per-year" of training time to meet training demands. But this was the first time we had suggested such a radical plan for our battalion. These MUTA-9s were divided into five tiers, each of four-and-a-half days, conducted over a consecutive 15-day period. Tiers would overlap with the one on either side by two days. (See Figure 3 below.) Consequently, scenarios for the range computer were written that allowed for all target presentations to be displayed from one lane's master scenario regardless of which tank table a crew was in line to fire.

Troops Available. We define a "crew" as a TC/gunner combination that has successfully completed all preliminary gunnery training together. Of course, drivers and loaders are a necessary ingredient in all but the "Three-Man Crew" engagement. But the requirement was for TCs and gunners to arrive together at the range during the same period for qualification. We would "hot-bed" qualified drivers and loaders as a means of maintaining flexibility to accommodate soldiers scheduling time off from school or work during the extended training period. It is a testament to the dedication of families, employers, and high school and college ad-

Tier	Feb 1	Feb 2	Feb 3	Feb 4	Feb 5	Feb 6	Feb 7	Feb 8	Feb 9	Feb 10	Feb 11	Feb 12	Feb 13	Feb 14	Feb 15
I		Scouts, Mortars + 11 Tank Crews													
II				10 Tank Crews											
III							4 Tank Crews								
IV									7 Tank + 4 Bradley Crews (from the CAV Troop)						
V											11 Tank + 2 Bradley Crews (from the CAV Troop)				

Figure 3 – February 2000 IDT Breakdown

Range Personnel Support Requirements						
LANE A	**LANE B**	**LANE C**	**BN**	**BN ADMIN**	**BN LOG**	**TSBn**
2 Master Gunners + **1** NCOIC	**1** Master Gunner + **2** NCOICs	**2** Master Gunners + **1** NCOIC	CDR, XO, S3, CSM, BN MG	**2** Admin Personnel	**1** Rear Ops OIC	**1** OIC + **1** NCOIC
4 Safety NCOs	**3** Safety/Proofing NCOs	**4** Safety NCOs	**4** Range Tower Personnel	**3** Bus Drivers	**2** PLL Clerks + **1** PLL NCO	**16** TCEs + **1** BN Master Gunner
4 -Man Proofing Team	**3** Maint Personnel	**4** -Man Proofing Team	**4** Gate Guards	**1** Rear Support NCO	**1** Armorer	**2** Master Gunners
6 Loaders/ Drivers	**1** Commo NCO	**6** Loaders/ Drivers	**2** MCOFT IOs		**6** ATP Personnel	**2** Scout PLT OC/Ts
4 Maint Personnel	**2** Medical Personnel	**4** Maint Personnel			**7** LOGPAC Spt Pers	**1** Mortar PLT OC/T
1 Commo NCO	**1** Armorer	**1** Commo NCO			**4** Cooks	
3 Medical Personnel		**3** Medical Personnel			**3** KPs	
1 Armorer		**1** Armorer				
TTL = 26	**TTL = 13**	**TTL = 26**	**TTL = 15**	**TTL = 6**	**TTL = 24**	**TTL = 24**
Overall Total Support Personnel = **134** (Active Duty/AGR/Technician = **52**)						
Total Estimated Costs For Non-Active Duty Support Personnel = **$53,950**						

TABLE 1 – Range Personnel Support Requirements.

ministrators and teachers/professors that these soldiers could miss extra time from home, work, or school requirements.

Going into TY00, we determined the battalion had 36 assigned TC/gunner combinations. The brigade's cavalry troop added another six. These numbers would fluctuate right up until the MUTA-9 period for several reasons. Some soldiers were lost due to ETS. The Select, Train, Promote and Assess (STPA) program which guides advancement through the enlisted ranks in the National Guard also "broke" a crew here and there as a vacancy was announced and a soldier moved up. By the time we completed TCPC — our crew formation cutoff date — we were still set with 36 assigned of 44 authorized crews in the battalion. The names assigned to a handful of TC/gunner combinations were not the same in January 2000 as they had been in September 1999, however. (The cavalry troop was manning six of nine authorized crews.)

Another VERY important note about this particular assessment was the number of soldiers it would take to support range operations. This was the domain of the battalion master gunner, battalion command sergeant major, the battalion XO, and the TSBn staff. In their assessment, they provided for 24-hour operation of two simultaneous lanes (Lanes A and C) on the MPRC. For the last two tiers of gunnery, we would also run a third lane (Lane B) to assist with our brigade cavalry troop's M3 Bradley qualification. To ensure a low-risk assessment in a 24-hour training cycle, this operation required the personnel displayed in Table 1 above.

Besides our own unit personnel, we had active duty assistance. We could not have completed our task to standard if not for the assistance of the 1-394th Regiment (eSB 256) and 3-395th Armor, both of whom make up our TSBn. The TSBn personnel were an integral part of both our preparatory gunnery training and live-fire execution. In addition to assistance with preliminary gunnery training, TSBn NCOs were on our lanes to evaluate and assist with gunnery. This team, from 3-395th Armor from Fort Hood, Texas, provided 16 TCEs who were led by the unit's S3, senior master gunner, and its CSM. (The remainder of this TSBn battalion was processing and training the 49th Armored Division's soldiers for deployment to command Task Force Eagle.) Our own 1-394th Regiment (eSB 256) NCOs augmented this team. Execution of our entire gunnery program provides a very sound example of Total Force integration.

Not listed in the personnel table above were the soldiers who remained at the Fort Polk MATES facility. This facility is the normal storage site for most of our combat vehicles. It also houses additional parts and higher-echelon maintenance personnel. Having round-the-clock access to this area involved the additional duty assignment of a number of National Guard technicians. The additional maintenance support assistance helped keep our OR rate above 80% throughout the training period.

Preparation

The training mission was executed as shown in Figure 2. Our TCGST train-up in September paid big dividends in October. The battalion's TCs worked out deficiencies in their training techniques for TCGST tasks, and soldiers refreshed themselves on all tasks. This month of train-up ensured that all soldiers present completed the record TCGST with minimal TSBn mentor assistance. We also completed the evaluation in less time than has been the norm. Still, some crewmen were unavailable for the record TCGST and would have to make up their evaluation during the December IDT in conjunction with a 256th BDE CPX.

Our January TCPC also was well executed at the battalion's local training area using our state-and-unit-built, scaled TWGSS range. This training allowed for multiple iterations by crews, and was conducted for everyone within three weeks of the beginning of live fire gunnery. These are important points as the lack of numerous training iterations and non-continuous training time normally hamper Guard training tempo. Upon completion of TCPC, there were still nine crews who had not fired the course and would have to conduct this training prior to any range live fire. (As with our record TCGST, there is always some crew or crewman who has to conduct make-up training. This is always allowed for in training plans.)

Range preparations included scenario development, range coordination, and

ammunition requests by the battalion's AGR master gunner. Once completed by the battalion master gunner, ammunition requests were coordinated by the battalion's AGR logistics NCO. To complete these requests, assistance was also received from brigade and state training personnel.

As plans for the IDT began to firm up, we quickly saw a time benefit for both unit AGR, and Fort Polk operations personnel. In TY99, unit AGR personnel were away from home station for 45 days to conduct seven, separate, live fire gunnery IDTs. To complete the February IDTs, unit AGR personnel were at Fort Polk for a total of 22 days. It is a known fact that unit paperwork requirements suffer when the AGR staff goes to the field because there is simply no one left to complete these actions. Also, Fort Polk forestry personnel are required to conduct controlled burns and other actions down range from the MPRC. These actions cannot be accomplished while live fire gunnery occurs. The forestry team had several weekends freed up by the brigade that normally were requested for its unit's gunnery IDTs.

The personnel listed in Table 1 required close management by name. The battalion and companies' AGR leadership handled this task with great scrutiny. To conserve funding, weekly support personnel list "scrubs" ensured no more than the required number of personnel were placed on orders. (There normally is no set of orders cut for an IDT.) They also closely monitored TC/gunner combinations, assisting with deconfliction of any problems that would keep the pairings from training together. This hands-on approach to personnel management is SOP in active duty units who have 'hands on' their soldiers daily. It was a more intensive requirement than normal for us when we do not have day-to-day contact with more than 90 percent of our soldiers.

Execution

As a bottom line up front, the battalion qualified more than 90 percent of assigned tank crews with the highest percentage of "Q1" crews since 1993. The cavalry troop also qualified 100 percent of assigned tank and Bradley crews. Additionally, we received at least a "P" rating on all scout and mortar platoon training tasks. (The battalion S3 and two TSBn officers conducted a 72-hour, continuous, tactical FTX with the scout platoon while two TSBn NCOs evaluated the mortar platoon in their annual MORTEP.)

Range down time for targetry problems was minimal due to the efforts of the Fort Polk Range Control personnel. Our biggest problem seemed to be with the range's moving targets. These targets run on an old rail system and are often damaged by tank main gun hits. The only problem here is the lack of alternate targets and the fact that there is no way to meet engagement standards without them. Consequently, upgrading these targets is a high priority for Range Control.

Personnel management by name was the ONLY way to make this effort work. To that end, the S1 and S1 NCO developed a tracking board system. Each soldier reporting in received a laminated number. This number they retained on their person until it was time to leave Fort Polk. When a number was handed out, a paper tag with the soldier's name, rank and SSN information was put in its place. At a glance, the personnel section could tell how many soldiers were present overall, and within reach was each soldier's personal information if needed. While they all agree this method was NOT perfect, they only need to add simple refinements to this process the next time out. Throughout the 15-day period, however, BY NAME personnel accountability was maintained.

Summary

The battalion and cavalry troop believe we have cracked the code on conducting IDT gunnery qualification. Use of MUTA-9s provided tankers with the requisite time it takes to meet the challenging gunnery standards of the current version of *FM 17-12-1*. This continuous training time produced a greater-than 90 percent qualification rate with the highest number of Q1 crews in seven years.

This scheme of maneuver also paid great dividends for unit personnel. The amount of time AGR soldiers had to be away from home station — and home — was cut in half. Guard soldiers will also want to know this: there were only two complaints lodged by battalion soldiers to the chain of command in reference to the required, continuous days for the IDT. Every other soldier commented that the pace of gunnery operations was much more conducive to training than in any other IDT they remembered. (Also, soldiers appreciated having the month of November "off" — many of our soldiers like to hunt, and deer season in The Sportsman's Paradise begins that month.)

Perhaps our biggest dividend is that a proper training balance and focus is now achieved. After the gunnery cycle, the battalion is able to focus all of its efforts on maneuver and AT00, which will be a mission rehearsal exercise at Fort Hood in preparation for our NTC rotation in 2001. Our battalion will continue to conduct MUTA-9s in the future for gunnery qualification for all of its positive training and personnel benefits.

Just as in life, good work in the Army is a team effort. This article speaks of the hard, to-Army-standards work my battalion is known for. These men are the heart and soul of Task Force Geronimo. This article also could not have been finished were it not for the input of LTC Ron Johnson, my battalion commander; MAJ Byron Lafield, the battalion XO; and SFC Kelly Craig, the battalion master gunner. In the spirit of the Total Army concept, MAJ Scott King, team chief from my battalion's Training Support Battalion also weighed in with editorial comments as I worked on this project. My thanks to all of these gentlemen!

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